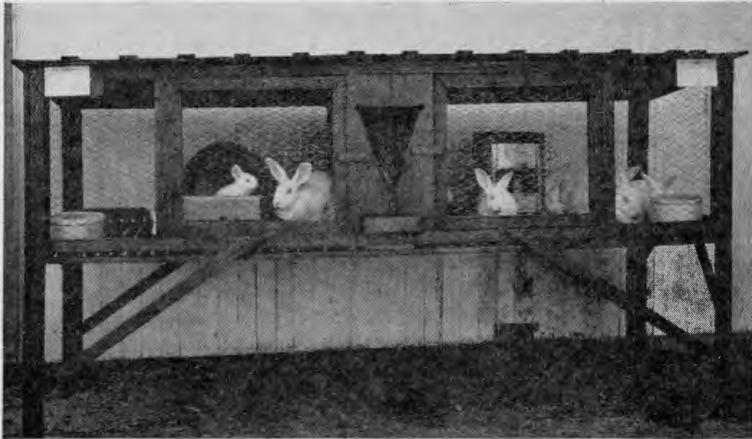


# Backyard Rabbit Raising For Meat Production



—Courtesy, U.S.D.I.

Fig. 1. A satisfactory two compartment rabbit hutch.

**Agricultural Extension Service**  
**STATE COLLEGE OF WASHINGTON**  
**Pullman, Washington**

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# BACKYARD RABBIT RAISING FOR MEAT PRODUCTION\*

By F. W. Frasier, Extension Poultryman

## INTRODUCTION

Consumption of rabbit meat in Washington is increasing, particularly by people raising rabbits for their own meat supply. Food is of major importance in times of national emergency, and domestic rabbit meat may well have a place on a FOOD FOR FREEDOM program. The home use of this fine grained, pearly white, and nutritious meat will not only release other meat for the armed forces and for exportation to our Allies, but it will add variety to the family diet throughout the year.

Having no objectionable features and requiring little space, rabbits are being raised in every state in the Union. They may be kept in the city backyard as well as on the farm, in fact, wherever poultry raising is permitted. Their hutches can be constructed of scrap lumber, used poultry wire, crates, and like material that can be obtained at little or no cost. Clean table scraps, garden waste, lawn clippings, palatable weeds, and small limbs trimmed from fruit trees may be utilized to supplement their regular rations.

Rabbit meat is quickly produced—only 90 days are required from the time the doe is mated until the young rabbits are ready for the table. It is economical too—only  $4\frac{1}{2}$  pounds of feed are required during this period to produce 1 pound of live weight. Older and heavier rabbits—those beyond the fryer age—are excellent for a fricassee or a roast.

## FAMILY FOOD FROM THE SMALL RABBITRY

Three or four does and a buck of the medium-weight or heavier breeds will furnish the average family with all the rabbit meat that it will use. Properly developed and finished fryer rabbits weighing  $3\frac{3}{4}$  to  $4\frac{1}{4}$  pounds will yield dressed carcasses of 2 to  $2\frac{1}{4}$  pounds, about 77 percent of which is edible. For variety it will be desirable to develop some of the young rabbits to heavier weights to fricassee and roast. Mature does and bucks that have served their period of usefulness may also be conditioned and used for these purposes. The heavier rabbits weighing 10 pounds will dress 6 to  $6\frac{1}{2}$  pounds. By developing junior bucks and does, the herd may be enlarged from time to time to supply meat to neighbors or markets.

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\* The information in this bulletin is largely taken from Wildlife Leaflet 218, "Domestic Rabbits in the Food For Freedom Program" of the U. S. Department of the Interior and Farmers Bulletin No. 1568 "Rabbit Parasites and Diseases" of the U. S. Department of Agriculture.

## CHOOSING A BREED

Practically all breeds of domestic rabbits are satisfactory for producing meat for home use. The medium weight and larger breeds—New Zealand, American, Beveren, French Silver, Chinchilla, and Flemish Giant—are best suited in size and conformation to the production of meat and fur. White skins usually bring higher prices. Choice of white breeds is largely a matter of personal preference.

## SELECTING BREEDING STOCK

For foundation stock, the breeder may start with young rabbits just weaned or with mature animals. If young rabbits are selected, the breeder will have opportunity to become acquainted with the animals and their habits by the time they are ready to go into production. On the other hand, time may be saved by buying mature stock, in which case it might be advisable to obtain one or more does, already bred, and then select a nonrelated buck when needed. Reliable breeders will gladly assist the beginner in selecting desirable, healthy stock. Buying rabbits locally saves transportation costs. Addresses of other breeders can be obtained from local, State, and National rabbit breeders association. The State College of Washington does not sell rabbits.

## HUTCHES AND EQUIPMENT

Hutches should be made so that they can be kept clean conveniently and will provide for the comfort and easy feeding of the rabbits. If portable, they can be easily moved under trees for shade and near or in buildings for protection. The standard hutch is 4 feet long, 2½ feet wide, and 2 feet high. Floors of the self-cleaning type may be made of slats, preferably hardwood, 1 to 1½ inches wide, spaced ⅝ inch apart.

Mangers should be large enough to hold a 24-hour supply of hay and so constructed that they can be filled without opening the hutch doors. Feed troughs of the drawer-type placed under the hay mangers are convenient for feeding and cleaning and will catch and save any shattered hay leaves. Over the feed trough, guards should be spaced 3 inches apart to prevent young rabbits getting into it and contaminating the feed.

A two-compartment hutch, as illustrated on the cover page, can be constructed economically by using chiefly crating or other scrap material. Following is a bill of material for its construction:  
Boards 1 inch thick:

- 4 pieces, 2 by 56 inches—for front corner posts.
- 4 pieces, 2 by 50 inches—for rear corner posts.
- 2 pieces, 2 inches by 8 feet—for top, front, and rear.
- 2 pieces, 2 inches by 8 feet—for bottom, front, and rear.
- 2 pieces, 2 by 30 inches—for bottom ends.
- 2 pieces, 2 by 32 inches—for top ends.
- 4 pieces, 2 by 40 inches—for front and rear braces.
- 4 pieces, 2 by 24 inches—for end braces.
- 2 pieces, 2 by 22 inches—for door jambs.
- 4 pieces, 2 by 24 inches—for horizontals of doors.
- 4 pieces, 2 by 22 inches—for verticals of doors.
- 2 pieces, 1 by 4 inches—for door latches.
- 2 pieces, 1 inch by 8 feet—for supports under slat floor.
- 54 pieces, 1 by 30 inches—for floor.
- 2 pieces, 2 by 28 inches—for sides of base under feed trough.
- 1 piece, 8 by 28 inches—for top of base under feed trough.
- 1 piece, 8 by 29 inches—for bottom of feed trough.
- 1 piece, 2 by 8 inches—for front end of feed trough.
- 1 piece, 12 by 22 inches—for manger front with V-shape opening 9 by 14 inches.
- 1 piece, 12 by 16 inches—for hay manger, rear.
- 1 piece, 2 by 28 inches—for manger, bottom.
- 4 pieces, 1 by 18 inches—for strips at end of hay manger, for attaching poultry netting.

Boards  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch thick:

- 2 pieces, 8 by 28 inches—for hay manger, top.
- 13 pieces, 8 by 36 inches—for roof.
- 12 pieces, 2 by 36 inches—for roof battens.
- 2 pieces, 4 by 8 inches—for hutch cards.

Poultry netting:

- 1 piece,  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch-mesh, 16-gage, 28 by 30 inches—for hay manger.
- 1 piece, 1-inch-mesh, 18-gage, 24 inches by 13 feet—for front, doors, and ends.
- 1 piece, 1-inch-mesh, 18-gage, 18 inches by 8 feet—for back.

Miscellaneous:

- 2 pieces tin,  $2\frac{1}{2}$  by 30 inches—for sides of feed trough.
- 4 twentypenny box nails—for hinges.
- 18 twentypenny box nails, to be driven into bottom of hay manger and spaced 3 inches—for guards to feed trough.

Sixpenny nails.

Poultry-netting staples.

For water containers, crocks or cans 8 inches in diameter and 4 inches deep (about  $\frac{1}{2}$  gallon) are satisfactory.

Inexpensive nest boxes for use during the warm season, in mild climates, and in well-protected rabbitries, may be made of nail kegs or apple boxes. Enclosed-box-type nest boxes 12 inches wide, 16 inches long, and 12 inches high, are desirable for use during winter and in exposed rabbitries.

Bills of materials and construction details for other types of hutches, shelters, nest boxes, and equipment for the rabbitry are given in Conservation Bulletin Number 25, "Rabbit Raising".

### CARING FOR THE RABBITS

Does and bucks of the small breeds may be mated when 5 to 6 months old; medium-weight breeds, when 6 to 7 months; and Giant breeds, when 9 to 12 months. Mating should be made when the does are coming into maturity; if delayed, it may be more difficult to get them to conceive. For each 10 breeding does 1 buck should be maintained.

The doe should always be taken to the buck's hutch for service, and mating should occur almost immediately. The doe should then be returned to her own hutch and a record made of the date and name or number of both doe and buck. It is well to return the doe to the buck's hutch on the fifth and eighteenth days following mating; if she runs from the buck and growls, it is pretty good evidence that she has conceived.

Does carry their young 31 to 32 days. Twenty-seven days following mating, a nest box should be placed in the hutch, bedding it with straw free of weeds and other foreign material. The doe will usually arrange the nesting material and line the nest with fur from her own body. If she fails to pull enough fur to cover the litter properly, some may be plucked from her sides, hips, or underline—it is easily removed at this time.

The day following kindling, quietly place the hand in the nest box and remove any undersized, deformed or dead young, leaving 6 to 8, the number depending on the suckling ability of the doe. If two or more does kindle about the same time, the litters may be evened up by transferring young from one to another. The does do not object to this transfer if the change is made within the first 2 or 3 days following kindling. To distract her attention from the

nest box, it is well to give her a small quantity of palatable food immediately following the inspection or the transfer of the young.

The litter should be weaned at about 2 months of age and the doe rebred. For family use, it may be desirable to select some of the more rapidly developed fryers at a younger age. If the litter is to be used for meat within 3 or 4 weeks after weaning, it may be kept together, but bucks and does that are to be retained for breeding purposes should be separated when weaned.

The sex of young rabbits can be determined easily by pressing open with the thumb and forefinger the sexual aperture just below the anal opening. In does, a longitudinal slit is observed; in bucks, the opening is round and the male organ can be made to protrude.

Rabbits should not be lifted by ears or legs. The proper method for carrying them is to grasp a fold of skin over the shoulders with the right hand, support the rump with the left hand, and hold the back of the rabbit against the body.

The animals require special attention during hot and cold weather. After newborn litters are dry and provided with a warm nest and a good covering of fur, they can stand low temperatures, as also can mature rabbits if kept out of drafts. Young litters and does ready to kindle are the ones most susceptible to heat. Feed sacks, wet down three or four times a day and placed on the hutch floor for the rabbit to lie on, will make it more comfortable. Water should not be placed on their bodies, for wet fur is a predisposing factor for colds and pneumonia. Restlessness of the young in the nest box indicates that the litter is too warm, and then some of the fur should be removed from the box for the warm part of the day and replaced when it gets cooler. In extremely warm climates it may be desirable during high temperatures to place the litter in a wire screen basket 6 by 6 by 15 inches hung on the inside of the hutch; when the temperature has moderated, the litter may be returned to the nest box. In sections where high temperatures continue throughout the night, the young must be placed in the nest box for a short time in the evening for suckling. They then should be replaced in the basket for the night and until time for the morning feeding.

## FEEDING

As rabbits consume a variety of feeds, there can be considerable latitude in selecting kinds to use. A ration may be made up of homegrown grains and hays. Whole grains—oats, wheat, buckwheat, grain sorghum, barley, and rye—are palatable and desirable.

They should be of good quality, indicated by plump, sound kernels, and free from molds or smuts. It is unnecessary to grind or roll the grains unless they are to be mixed with a finely ground meal in which case the mixture should be dampened slightly before feeding, to prevent the meal being wasted by settling to the bottom of the feed trough. Harder types or flinty corns are not desirable, and much will be wasted unless they are ground into meal.

The grains have similar feeding value and can be substituted one for the other, pound for pound, without changing the nutritive value of the ration. They should be selected on the basis of quality and cost.

Economy may be practiced by feeding waste from the table (with the exception of sour or greasy foods), trimmings from garden vegetables, lawn clippings, palatable weeds, sweetpotato and pea vines, small branches trimmed from fruit trees, green-corn leaves, and similar plant materials.

A good quality hay should be kept in the mangers at all times. The legumes—alfalfa, clover, sweetclover, lespedeza, vetch, soybean, kudzu, cowpea, or peanut hays—are more desirable than carbonaceous hays and should be used when available. The carbonaceous hays—timothy, bluegrass, bluestem, and Johnson, prairie, and Bermuda grasses—may be fed if cut when still growing. The hay will then be of finer quality and will contain more food value than if cut when mature. Rabbits enjoy and should have green feed or root crops when these can be grown at home or be made available without too much cost. The root crops—carrots, turnips, sweetpotatoes, sugar beets, and mangels—can be fed fresh or stored for winter use when green feeds may not be available. To prevent contamination, the green feeds or root crops should be fed in the hay mangers or feed troughs. Rabbits that are unaccustomed to green feeds should each receive daily a small handful at first; then an increased quantity as they become accustomed to them. Green feeds or root crops should not replace entirely the grain, household waste, and hay ration except in the case of mature rabbits that are not in production.

Water should always be available except during freezing temperatures, when it should be provided once a day just before feeding, and then the containers should be emptied promptly to prevent freezing. Rabbits should have access to a block of white salt at all times.

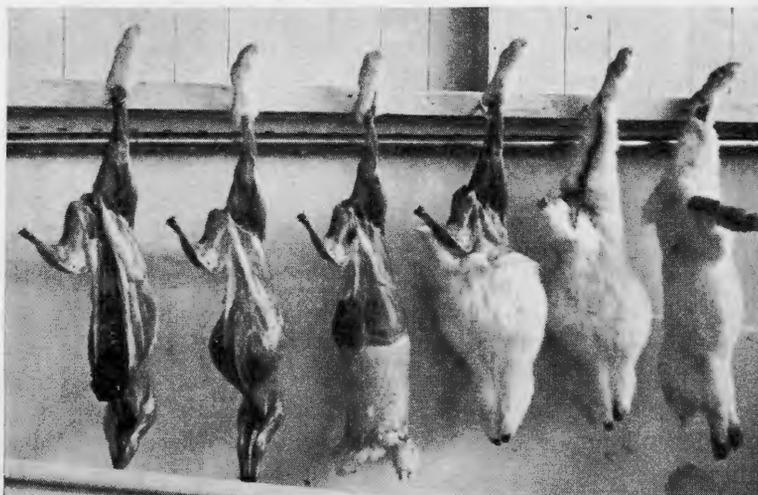
Once each day, dry does, herd bucks, and developing breeding stock should receive the quantity of grain or grain and household scraps that they will consume readily within 20 to 30 minutes. The quantity to feed the individual rabbit will depend on its condition—if it is too thin, the quantity should be increased slightly; if too fleshy, it should be decreased. A day or two previous to kindling the doe will usually eat less, and thereafter her grain or grain and household scrap portion of the ration should be increased gradually, so that she will consume more feed without waste.

When 3 weeks old, the young will usually begin to eat solid foods, and then the doe and litter should have all the grain or grain and household scrap mixture they will consume each 24 hours. When the litter is weaned, the doe should again be fed the restricted grain or grain and household scrap ration with hay and green feed.

The development and finish of young rabbits will be hastened by a balanced ration containing plant protein supplements—soybean, peanut, or linseed—in meal, pea-size cake, or pelleted form. These supplements may be used in the grain mixture for does and litters by mixing 1 part, by weight, of any one of them with 2 parts, by weight, of whole grains; for example, 1 part of whole oats, 1 part of whole wheat, and 1 part of soybean, peanut, or linseed, in the pelleted or pea-size cake form. To insure proper mixing, when cornmeal or other finely ground feed is used, part of the mixture should consist of rolled grains, for example, 1 part by weight of rolled oats, 1 part of cornmeal, and 1 part of soybean, peanut, or linseed, in the meal form. This mixture should be dampened before feeding. The protein supplements, which should be selected on the basis of cost, can be used interchangeably pound for pound without materially altering the food value of the ration.

### **SLAUGHTERING AND SKINNING**

A rabbit to be killed may be stunned by hitting it with a stick on top of the head back of the ears. It is then suspended and the head removed immediately to permit thorough bleeding. A No. 6 screw hook fastened to a wall 5 feet from the floor is handy for suspending the carcass while it is being dressed (fig. 2). The hook is inserted between the tendon and bone of the right hind leg just above the hock. The tail and front feet are cut off. The free rear leg is removed at the hock joint. The skin is cut just below the hock of the suspended leg and opened inside the leg to the root of the tail. The incision is extended to the hock joint of the left leg. The edges



—Courtesy, U.S.D.I.

**Fig. 2.** Steps in skinning rabbits. (right to left).

of the skin are separated from the flesh, and the skin is so pulled down as to leave the fat on the carcass.

Avoid making any other cuts in the skin. After it has been removed, make a slit in the carcass along the median line of the belly. Remove the entrails but leave the liver, heart, and kidneys in place. Remove the right hind foot at the hock joint.



—Courtesy, U.S.D.I.

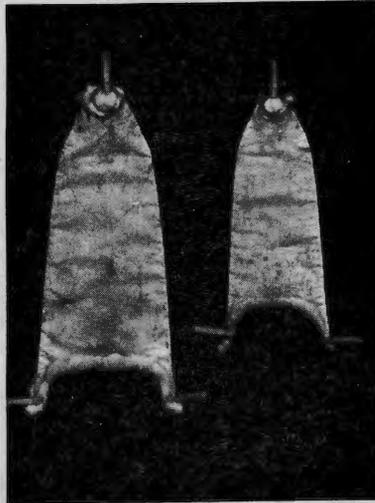
**Fig. 3.** Cuts of a rabbit carcass and methods of display for market.

Cleanse the carcass by rinsing in cold water to remove any stray hair and blood. It may then be cut up and displayed for sale as in figure 3.

### CARE OF THE PELTS

Pelts are a byproduct of rabbit-meat production. All have a market value and should be properly handled, as they are now (1943) in demand, especially by fur and felting industries. The returns from the sale of pelts will go a long way toward paying the feed bill.

Shapers for the pelts (fig. 4) may be made from No. 9 galvanized wire 4 feet long for the small ones and 5 feet long for those that are larger. A thin board for shaping the skins of fryers should be 24 inches long and 4 inches wide at the narrow end and 7 inches at the base. A board shaper for skins from rabbits weighing 10 to 12 pounds should be 30 inches long and 4 inches wide at the narrow end and 9 inches at the base.



—Courtesy, U.S.D.I.

Fig. 4. Pelts properly placed on shapers, both front legs on one side.

While the skin is still warm, put it, flesh side out, with the fore part over the narrow end of the shaper, and remove all wrinkles. The skin should be so placed on the shaper that both front legs are on one side. It may be made fast with clothespins at the open end of the shaper, and should not be unduly stretched.

The following day, see that the edges of the pelt are drying flat and that the skin on the front legs is straightened out. Remove any

surplus fat, for if left on the skin it may cause fat burns and lower the value.

Hang the skins out of reach of mice or rats until dry. They should not be dried in the sun or by artificial heat.

If the dried skins are to be stored for any length of time, they should be sprinkled with naphtha flakes and packed in a tight box.

Salt should never be used for preparing rabbit skins for market.

## RABBIT DISEASES

### Coccidiosis

The seriousness of Coccidiosis lies primarily in the heavy mortality of young rabbits from six weeks to two months old. Liver Coccidiosis, or what is called "spotted liver" disease is often seen in young rabbits about three or four weeks of age and they frequently die in large numbers. Affected rabbits are listless, have poor hair coats, and usually become pot-bellied. Some of them will survive and reach maturity, while others slowly waste away and die. Occasionally no symptoms will be noticed until the rabbits are dressed, at which time white spots will be seen on the liver. When cut open these white spots usually liberate white, creamy material.

The most effective way to control Coccidiosis is by sanitation. This consists of removing manure, soiled bedding and unused feed, and cleaning hutches and equipment at regular intervals. Even though one has a modern type self-cleaning hutch, they need attention, as there are always platforms, corners, feeding and watering equipment that must be regularly cleaned. The procedure should be mechanical cleaning first, followed by washing the pen with scalding lye water. The lye water is made by adding 1 pound of commercial lye to 10 gallons of boiling water. Care should be taken to protect the hands and face from the lye water. In case of an outbreak of the disease a complete cleanup should be made every day during warm weather, and at least every other day during cool weather. No treatment for coccidiosis in rabbits has been tested on a sufficiently large number of animals to warrant its recommendation to rabbit owners.

### Sniffles

This is a disease that may be seen in rabbits of any age, but is usually thought of as a disease of young rabbits. It affects the upper respiratory tract, or nasal passage. The first symptom is sneezing. There is a thick discharge from the nose and a heavy, watery discharge from the eyes. The hair and skin around the nose will

often become matted and crusty. This disease is usually chronic and tends to clear up, only to be followed by it occurring again. The rabbits will grow weaker and thinner, and pneumonia will develop that results in death of the animals. Conditions that may lead to its development are: unsanitary conditions, improper feeding, poor hutch construction and equipment, drafts and exposures. Good housing, feeding and sanitation that will keep the rabbits in the best of condition are control measures suggested.

#### **Other Diseases**

Diseases and parasites rather common with rabbits which are more or less controlled through sanitation are ear and skin mange, lice and fleas, sore hocks, worms, and others not quite so common. Whenever there is a serious disease problem one may wish to consult a veterinarian.

#### **RABBIT MANURE**

The manure from rabbits is rich in plant food. For that reason it is especially valuable for garden and truck crops. Analysis indicates that rabbit manure contains about 2% of nitrogen which is considerably higher than that found in manure produced by other farm animals. In phosphoric acid and potash content, rabbit manure is equal to others. This makes rabbit manure an important fertilizer to be used in connection with vegetable growing.

If there is a cover crop growing on the garden, the manure should be spread as it is taken from the hutches. This is the best system that can be devised. Where it cannot be spread on a cover crop, it should be stored under cover and applied in the spring before planting.

This bulletin deals entirely with the small unit operated for producing rabbit meat as economically as possible for home consumption. Breeders interested in commercial production may secure USDI Conservation Bulletin Number 25, "Rabbit Raising".

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